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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISLAMABAD 002162

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SUBJECT: FORMER RULING PARTY PML SPLITS

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Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Following weeks of wrangling within the former ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) about the intra-party electoral process, and on the heels of the July 20 national-level party elections in which Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain was reelected unopposed as PML president, dissident party members formally announced on August 20 their split with the party to form the "genuine" PML. The dissidents--led by Salim Saifullah Khan, Hamid Nasir Chattha, and Humayun Akhtar--charged Shujaat with seeking an unconstitutional third term and of transforming the party into a family enterprise. Shujaat loyalists largely dismiss the dissidents. PML members have claimed in the media that the dissident group is being bankrolled by former President Pervez Musharraf, who they say is using the faction as a vehicle for a possible political comeback, a charge PML dissidents deny. While elements within the dissident group seem amenable to reunification if certain conditions are met, it is unlikely to happen at this time. End Summary

¶2. (U) On August 20, the split within the PML became official when the "like-minded" or "dissident" members of the party announced an interim new party leadership following a convention they held that day in Islamabad. The PML dissident group claim that the July 20 reelection of Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain to a third term as the party president and Mushahid Hussain Sayed as the secretary general did not conform to the party's constitution and electoral procedures, which they say bars a president from running for a third term (Reftel). The PML splinter group is headed by Salim Saifullah Khan, Hamid Nasir Chattha, Humayun Akhtar, and Khurshid Kasuri, respectively the splinter group's interim president, chairman, secretary general, and chairman of the steering committee. They reportedly plan to hold party elections at the central and lower level within a year, and have submitted to the Election Commission of Pakistan a request to retain use of the PML party name and symbol.

¶3. (C) Khan, the president of the PML splinter group and a National Assembly Senator, told PolCouns in a September 1 meeting that members of the dissident group parted ways with Shujaat because of the latter's dominance of the party and violation of the party's constitution in seeking a third term. He argued that his group ultimately wants a party where a "merit-based system" prevails in selecting party leaders and not one led by a family "dynasty."

¶4. (C) On August 21, Poloff met with Chattha, the chairman of the PML splinter group and current member of the Punjab Provincial Assembly who lost his National Assembly seat in the 2008 elections. He downplayed the division within the party as an "internal squabble" and characterized it as a "split but not a split." Chattha noted that the dissidents' goal was not/not the formation of a new party, but rather to reclaim the PML through a true democratic process. Chattha,

like Khan, cited Shujaat's family dominance within the party as a significant factor in the split. He revealed that, as a compromise, the dissidents had given Shujaat the option to step down to let another family member run for party president, but he refused.

¶15. (C) Both Chattha and Khan expressed concern about Shujaat's health and consequently his ability to effectively lead the PML. While Chattha was careful not to be overly critical of Shujaat, he said Shujaat suffers from Parkinson's disease and was not in a position to lead the party. Khan also echoed similar views about Shujaat's health, adding that Shujaat's lack of verbal acuity was a hindrance in this "media age." Chattha, however, reserved his harshest comments for Shujaat's cousin and former Punjab Chief Minister Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, who he said was greatly disliked within the party and who was yet another factor that led the group to splinter. Despite these criticisms, Chattha suggested the split was not irrevocable should party reelections take place through a newly-elected general council.

¶16. (C) The dissident group seems confident they have the numerical support to take over the party. Chattha declared that 10,000 party members were present at the convention they held on August 20, a figure which seems highly exaggerated. Khan told PolCouns that 11 National Assembly Members and six Senators had joined their ranks and that they were seeking the support of four other Senators from Balochistan; he added they needed 11 Senators to take control of the bench (Note: The PML holds 53 seats in the National Assembly and 21 in the Senate. End Note.).

¶17. (C) Chattha disclosed to Poloff that Atta Maneka, leader of the PML Forward Bloc in the Punjab Assembly which had earlier split with the PML in 2008, was now supporting their group; Khan also confirmed this point in his meeting with PolCouns. Maneka, who controls approximately 30 Members of the Punjab Assembly and who wields influence at the provincial level, has had ties with the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Overall, Chattha stated the PML dissident group had its eyes on the next general elections and was less concerned with gaining influence in the current National Assembly, where he said the group was happy to sit on the Opposition benches.

¶18. (C) Members of the PML Shujaat group largely dismiss the dissident group. Donya Aziz, a PML member of the national assembly and Shujaat loyalist, described the group as "insignificant" in a August 28 meeting with PolCouns. She argued the dissidents simply do not have the grassroots support they claim to have. She discounted claims that thousands of people showed up to the group's August 20 convention, citing the event venue simply lacked such capacity. On August 31, Poloff met with Makhdoom Syed Faisal Saleh Hayat, leader of the PML party in the National Assembly and former Interior Minister, who echoed similar sentiments about the lack of real heavyweight support behind the dissidents. He charged they were mainly disgruntled members who once held prominent political positions but were defeated in the 2008 national elections, and who now blame the party for this loss. He speculated that members of the dissident group would eventually defect to the PML-N.

¶19. (C) PML members have alleged in the media that Musharraf has aligned himself with the PML dissident group. They claim he is providing the dissidents with financial backing and that he is in fact the mastermind behind the split. They further charge that Musharraf was denied the party's leadership in favor of Shujaat and consequently he is using the PML dissident group to stage a political comeback. Khan in his meeting with PolCouns denied that Musharraf was affiliated with the dissident group or that he was funding them. He admitted his older brother and National Assembly Member Humayun Saifullah Khan had met with Musharraf recently, but simply out of courtesy. Khan added that if he goes to London he would meet with Musharraf and would advise him to remain abroad where he could still play a role

politically while traveling the lecture circuit. Khan maintained that their decision to split was "a principled stand."

¶10. (C) Comment: The dissident group seems determined to move ahead with plans to claim the PML as its own. While dissident members like Chattha seem amenable to a party reunification should Shujaat capitulate to their demands of holding new intra-party elections under a more democratic process, it is unlikely Shujaat would agree to such terms, thereby making party reunification doubtful. The dissident group will continue to seek out more support from among PML ranks and elsewhere to bolster its numbers within the National Assembly, but its focus is primarily on finding a political home for its members in one of the two major parties (PPP or PML-N) in advance of the next general elections. Assertions that Musharraf may have played a role in the party's split and that he is supporting the dissidents, while unverified, are plausible. End Comment.

PATTERSON